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ABSTRACT

Personal ads, used to transcend social estrangement, are nothing other than written attempts at courtship. The idea of courtship is to maintain interaction through the continual negotiation of ambiguities. Historically, women have employed question-asking and attention-getting devices to combat male dominance and inattention in cross-sex conversations, and these techniques are reflected in personal ads. Paul Grice and others have suggested that for an act of communication to succeed, it must be governed by cooperation. Grice's four categories of maxims (quantity, quality, relation, and manner) can be applied to personal ads if revised as follows: (1) make your contribution as informative as required; (2) do not make your contribution more informative than required; (3) try to make your contribution one that is true; (4) do not say what you believe to be false; (5) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence; (6) do not say that which you believe may be misunderstood; and (7) be orderly. In one newspaper containing personal ads, women's ads were more likely than men's to satisfy these conditions. (SG)

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The Rhetoric of Courtship
Conversation and Cooperation in Newspaper Personal Ads

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In A Rhetoric of Motives, Kenneth Burke defines **courtship** as:

> the use of suasive devices for the transcending of social estrangement. There is the "mystery" of courtship when "different kinds of beings" communicate with each other.... [W]e interpret any variants... in social intercourse as sign of a corresponding mystery in communication. (208)

Personal ads--a context in which men and women, two "different kinds of being," communicate in order to "transcend social estrangement"--can be seen as nothing other than written attempts at courtship. The idea of courtship is to **maintain interaction through the continual negotiation of ambiguities**: without Burke's element of "mystery," there would be no ambiguities to negotiate; social beings would remain estranged, and cooperative interaction--in this case, courtship--would not be possible.

I would like to frame my discussion of personal ads, then, with this idea of cooperation which is usually associated with "women's language." **Historically**, women have had to develop a number of strategies--question-asking and attention-getting devices, for example--in order to combat male dominance and inattention in cross-sex conversation; hence cooperative communication styles and strategies have typically been

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associated with "women's language." Men have not **traditionally** used these strategies with much frequency--nor have they needed it--opting instead for what have been perpetuated as "competitive" strategies like interruption. However, this dichotomy is simplistic and not very accurate. So instead of focusing on the gender and power assumptions that go along with this idea of cooperation, I'm going to concentrate on its viability as a **non**-gender-linked, **contextually**-powerful conversation strategy.

Much of what is accepted about conversation may be attributed to Paul Grice--and it's no coincidence that Grice bases his theories on a principle of cooperation (the **Cooperative Principle**, which I will refer to as the CP). In "Logic and Conversation" Grice posits that in order to be successful, any act of communication--oral or written--must be governed by the CP:

> Our talk exchanges...are characteristically... cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them...a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. This purpose or direction may be fixed from the start...or it may evolve during the exchange; it may be fairly definite, or it may be so indefinite as to leave very considerable latitude to the participants.... We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected...to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is

> required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (45)

Grice's focus on cooperation reinforces my initial assumption that conversation is a cooperative effort produced by coparticipants' "continuing agreement to pay attention to one another"--that it occurs, in other words, through collaborative interaction and the empowerment of coparticipants.

According to Grice, the CP is the overriding shared assumption within the context of conversations that allows coparticipants to communicate efficiently. The "general features of discourse" to which he links the CP are represented by four categories of maxims--quantity, quality, relation, and manner--which I will explain later. Since Grice's maxims relate directly to the context of conversation, and to expectations about the behavior of coparticipants based on and within that context, analyzing the ways in which conversational maxims are exploited in personal ads will help to explain how readers justify their interpretations of the messages transmitted via personal ads. Coparticipants in personal ads recognize **in that context** a common purpose (which in the Star-Telegram means heterosexual social relationships) and communicate according to shared contextual assumptions. Since in the Fort Worth Star-Telegram personal ads **only** appear with other personal ads, one context, albeit an autonomous one, is already established and shared by readers and writers. Personal ads coparticipants may not share any other cognitive environment in any other context, but they do share the

context of the personals columns; one way in which this context manifests itself involves the adherence to certain assumptions about the information shared in personals and the ways in which this information is conveyed.

But the original maxims outlined by Grice cannot be immediately or completely applied to written conversations. For one thing, they have undergone significant revision by Grice himself, and more recently, by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their book Relevance, which emphasizes the use of communicative resources (time, energy, money, etc.) for **efficient and cooperative** cognitive processing. Sperber and Wilson explain that conversational exchanges are governed by a **guarantee of relevance**, which theoretically parallels Grice's Cooperative Principle. Again, I don't think it's coincidence that Sperber and Wilson's governing principle is one of cooperation. In any case, even with these revisions, some of Grice's conversational maxims seem inappropriate or redundant in the context of personal ads. I shall therefore present my own (slight) revisions of Grice's maxims as they relate specifically to personal ads.

The first two maxims are identical to Grice's original maxims of quantity, which relate to the amount of information provided in a conversation:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

If too much or not enough information is offered, then communication is neither efficient nor cooperative.

Providing "enough but not too much" information for the current purposes of an exchange, however, is no simple task in personal ads, since attention and cooperation are achieved when coparticipants **negotiate** a limited amount of **personal** information. What and how much information writers choose to offer for negotiation in their ads can pose problems, so it is not surprising that readers and writers of personal ads frequently misjudge the cooperativeness of the information they choose to present. An average ad in the Star-Telegram's personal column exceeds the newspaper's recommended 40-word limit by at 22 words--but not always to conversational advantage, as in this example:

> Hi reader! I'm a SWM, 34, 5'9", 215 lbs., stocky, not obese, light brown hair, blue eyes, healthy, clean shaven nonsmoker, no alcoholic, yet occasional drinker, no ex-con, conservative politically but not in politics, and no illegal drug user. I'm wanting a caring, affectionate, romantic, communicative, open-minded, flexible and committal relationship with a SWF who really wants the same kind of relationship who is not a feminist, yuppie, selfish, materialistic, a liberal politically, people game player, or people user. I enjoy country life, amusement parks, picnics, zoos, museums, walks, bicycling, volleyball, softball, basketball, flag football, bowling, miniature golf,

table tennis, playing cards and trivia, watching VCR movies, reading history, fishing, camping, swimming, playing pool and shuffleboard, pitching horseshoes, playing video games, C&W or light rock music, dining out occasionally, and quiet evenings at home. I am not a bar person. If you are a SWF really interested in a monogamous, hopefully lasting relationship, please write to....(ID#0305, 17 September 1989)

The writer of this 157-word ad illustrates two problems characteristic of over-informative communication in this context--redundancy and over-explicitness--neither of which facilitate the participation of potential readers.

Some ads, of course, have the opposite problem: they don't give **enough** information for the purposes of the exchange. Brevity is not to be equated with uninformativeness, however. The following ad, for example, is only 36 words long but both reveals relevant information and encourages readers' responses.

Two fun loving ladies looking for a few GOOD men. Must have eyes that can melt. 28-40, 5'10"+, S/DWM, D/D free, like kids and ready for something different. Give us your ideas of romance. (ID#3622, 21 May 1989)

The writers of this ad are specific about both **who** they want to respond to their conversation and **how** they want them to respond. The writers balance concrete information with information which can be cooperatively negotiated. The facilitative command "Give us your ideas of romance," for example, functions much like a question here in that it simultaneously specifies the conditions

of the response and encourages it. They provide the request for information, but offer only information themselves; therefore it is the responsibility of the reader to negotiate "ideas of romance" in order to sustain the conversation.

The next three maxims I propose are identical to Grice's original maxims of quality:

3. Try to make you contribution one that is true.
4. Do not say what you believe to be false.
5. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Truth-related maxims are perhaps the most problematic in personal ads, since readers know nothing about writers except what they can infer from the ads themselves. Coparticipants must of necessity, then, assume mutual integrity and a mutual understanding of the CP. Otherwise, the subjectivity of common personal ads terms like "attractive," "financially secure," "professional," and "athletic" (as well as the range of criteria used in the selection of those terms) renders them uninformative. "Professional," for example, really only means that the writer has a job or is qualified to hold one; a person can be a lawyer, a shoe salesperson, or a prostitute and still be part of a profession. Many writers qualify such subjective terms, as in "Good-looking Fort Worth physician" (ID# 3601, 18 June 1989). Rather than run the risk that readers might misinterpret "professional" or "financially secure" and not respond, this writer maximizes the relevance of his information for them: he explicitly states "Fort Worth physician," leaving readers to

associate that information with the fact that physicians average about $150,000 a year in Fort Worth, and hence derive from the information that the writer, along with the added perk of being "good-looking," probably has a high income. "Professional" is not as informative as is required in this exchange, so the information "Fort Worth physician" not only contributes to the truthfulness, but also the efficiency and cooperativeness of the ad.

Because so many words used in personal ads have a range of possible meanings and are subject to readers' misunderstanding, I would add one more truth-related maxim to the previous three:

6. Do not say that which you believe might be misunderstood.

In a context-oriented theory of written conversation, the relationship of writers to their potential **audience** is as important as the relationship of the writers to their **messages**. Since honesty and deceptiveness cannot be checked in personal ads, coparticipants must assume that **genuine** truthfulness is guaranteed if they hope to communicate effectively.

The maxims Grice relates to manner must be revised quite significantly to apply to written conversations. To begin with, his concept of brevity can be linked to his concept of informativeness--both of which are encouraged in the Star-Telegram. Second, Grice's original stipulations for perspicuity and the avoidance of obscurity and ambiguity do not necessarily facilitate coparticipation in written conversations. Since the negotiation of the "reality" of information is so important to

the success of these written courtships, **obscurity and ambiguity are only to be avoided if they conflict with the maxims of informativeness or truthfulness** discussed earlier. While still being honest, writers must allow for interpretation and participation on the part of readers, and this often entails obscurity and ambiguity. Consider this example:

> Active, happy, pretty, positive thinking, particular, DWF weight, height proportionate. I'm very loving & passionate, but am a Christian who believes in chaste behavior. Non-smoker, maybe social drinker. Send photo & short bio if you are a special guy, 45-55.... (ID# 0170, 18 June 1989)

In this ad, the words "but am a Christian who believes in chaste behavior" serve both to inform (announcing that the writer is not interested in a sexual relationship--or that does not want her readers to think she is), and to balance the ambiguity of such words as "active," "particular," and "special guy." Successful negotiation of ambiguity in this ad thus means choosing a meaning that is compatible with "Christian who believes in chaste behavior." It is true that the context alone enables the construction of ambiguity in personal ads because no one's identity can be considered complete in 40 to 100 words, but writers generally balance that built-in ambiguity with unambiguous information (e.g., age, vital statistics) so that their ads facilitate cooperation and yet may be read efficiently.

Only one of Grice's maxims of manner remains unrevised in my model; thus the final conversational maxim for personal ads is:

7. Be orderly.

While orderliness in personal ads is not necessarily informative, it does help to sustain interest and thus encourages cooperative and efficient communication: when readers expend less time and cognitive energy interpreting and processing information, the relevant information is more immediately apparent. The following ad serves as an illustrative bad example:

> Young looking, young acting middle age W/M used to younger ladies, looking for attractive, well built (not necessarily petite) (big or a little heavy OK) (full-figured is fine, maybe great), young or middle age lady (20s-40s) to share my life. A lady who is not afraid to love her man as he loves her. She must know what she wants and be able to communicate. Must want to be pampered, receive lots of attention, tender loving care, physical contact and above all, security. Must be sincere, honest, & open-minded. No prude. Willing to give as well as receive. Small family OK. My lady won't have to be employed outside the house if she doesn't want to be. I don't smoke; you can. I don't do drugs, am disease free, social drinker and go to church. You don't have to be perfect; I'm not. But I'm not a slouch and I'm not a dog. I'm 5'10 1/2", 190 lbs., 54 years young (don't be fooled by my age), good looking and good shape. And, there is more. I know beauty is only skin deep but you want someone you can be proud of. I do too. I've

> seen some beautiful overweight ladies; that's fine. But, if you are grossly fat, extremely homely or, unattractive, please don't reply. Also, I'm sorry but I'm not interested in a lady who says she's 40-45 and looks 60-70. No games. This ad is for real. I work evenings, 2:30 to 10:30. I'm off 10:30 Thursday night till 2:30 Sunday afternoon. And, I don't like living alone. If interested.... (ID# 3567, 14 May 1989)

The man who composed this ad attends to few of the maxims associated with relevance: his ad is more informative than is required; the assumed truthfulness of the information is rendered questionable by his frequent digressions, qualifications, and possible contradictions; and finally, the ad is anything but brief and orderly--featuring 264 words and five parenthetical statements, three of which are consecutive. The ad's disregard for most of the cooperative maxims all but ensures its failure as a written conversation.

Certainly, as this and earlier examples suggest, many attempts at conversation don't succeed--at least not theoretically--because they don't adhere to the Cooperative Principle. Since the very purpose of personal ads is courtship--both literally and rhetorically--it makes little sense to write one which does not allow for and even encourage response. In personal ads, where women and men are interactive equals, their greatest "power" ironically seems to lie in their choice of traditionally "powerless" (i.e., cooperative) strategies of

communication. And yet coparticipants in these conversations often make it clear--consciously or unconsciously, and in a number of ways--that they are unwilling or unable to cooperate in the way the context or certain maxims require.

You may have noticed that all of my "bad" examples came from men's ads and all my "good" ones came from women's ads. Although I tried to even this out, I found the inequity fairly representative. I don't want to imply here that women are simply "better" at writing personal ads than men. Given the fact that the still-new Fort Worth personal ads are essentially adaptations of **oral** courtship narratives and rituals, and that women have historically developed more effective and efficient conversation skills, such a conclusion is not without grounds. However, I think that my analysis might suggest a broader and more optimistic conclusions.

The research of Nancy Chodorow and others has shown that theories of female psychological development are similar to theories of androgyny, which suggests that gender boundaries may be **transcended** (Chodorow's word) more easily and effectively through "female" communication strategies than with "male" strategies. This, I think, applies directly and fairly significantly to Burke's notion of "transcendence" in courtship. "Women's" conversation strategies--characterized by such features as mutuality of interaction work, collaboration,and flexibility --are emerging as effective and potentially powerful means for speakers and writers in a variety of contexts; the mere efficiency of alternative styles (such as demonstrated in

personal ads) suggests that the value of such strategies must be reassessed. A distinctly female definition of power--one which succeeds through cooperative interaction and the **empowerment** of other speakers and writers--offers a significant challenge to power structures based on dominance and typically maintained by males. The fact that men **and** women are adopting these forms of "power" suggests that instead of being strictly associated with "women's language," they represent and androgynous, non-sex-preferential, **transcendent** form of language accessible to and successful for everyone.